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Reasons and the form of practical identity

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Extrapolating from Williams's formulation of internalism about reasons, I offer a sketch of a conception of practical identity constituted by certain of the agent's conative states and their content. First I make some preliminary distinctions among the kinds of conative states, arguing that the conative states that belong to (what Williams calls) an agent's motivational set are those whose contents are adopted as his ends. Next I discuss the phenomenon of practical necessity, which suggests that certain practical engagements one has with certain concepts are such that, if one loses them one also loses one's "hold on reality." Such practically engaged concepts constitute the matter of one's practical identity. The constitution of the *matter* of practical identity is historically and culturally contingent; it cannot therefore issue in normative reasons that are objective in the sense an externalist might demand.

How we behave, I find increasingly,
Depends on something like a sense of shape,
Not on ambition or ability.

What shape's our comfort? That's what it decides,
Long before policy has woken up.

...

(Philip Larkin, "A Sense of Shape" vv. 1–5; Larkin 2012, 290)

1. My goal in this essay is to begin to sketch a conception of practical identity of an agent as constituted by certain of his conative states and their content.¹ I shall take Williams's internalism about reasons² as the bare bone to put flesh on. The first layer of the flesh consists in an explication of Williams's notion of the subjective motivational set in terms of practically productive conative states, and an analysis of the phenomenon of what Williams calls practical necessity as indicative of the matter constituting one's practical identity.³ I conclude with some remarks on some of the implications of this conception of the matter of practical identity concerning the objectivity of reasons, and on the prospect of considering the form of practical identity.

Williams's considered characterisation of internalism about reasons, which purports to capture a necessary condition for an agent's having a normative reason, is as follows:

A has a reason to *V* only if there is a sound deliberative route from A's subjective motivational set [hereafter *S*] to A's *V*-ing (2001, 91).⁴

To say that there is a "sound deliberative route" from *X* to *Y* is to say, roughly, that there is a piece of sound practical reasoning, starting from *X* and yielding *Y* as the conclusion, which the agent in question can reflectively endorse because it is sound. This does not mean that if *A* is to perform an action intentionally and for a reason, *A* needs to actually deliberatively go through the relevant piece of reasoning. It is enough that *A* is able to, in some suitably counterfactual and non-empirical-psychological sense of "able," do so.⁵ Further, the reflec-

¹ In this essay I use "agent" to mean *human* agent, although strictly speaking there are non-human agents, since any substance that can be said to cause something is an agent. I shall often refer to an agent (of unspecified sex or gender) as a "he," taking this pronoun to be only grammatically masculine and semantically neuter.

² In this essay I use "reasons" to mean *normative* reasons, or (roughly) reasons that explain why something *ought* to be the case, where the notion of "something ought to be the case" is to be interpreted very inclusively (thus it comprehends, among many other things, both "*A* ought to *V*" and "It ought to be the case that *p*" where *p* need not mention any agent). Further, "*A* has a reason to *V*" as I understand it, is equivalent to "there is a reason for *A* to *V*" and to "*A* ought *pro tanto* to *V*."

³ My discussion therefore involves a considerable amount of Williams exegesis. But since that is not my goal, I am not terribly concerned with the incompleteness of the exegesis, nor with the departures from Williams's position that I may (or in fact, I am sure I will) make. But the conception of practical identity I am trying to sketch resonates strongly, and I believe overlaps largely, with the conception of character that Williams draws.

⁴ Throughout the discussion, in passages cited, I replace Greek alphabet letters (ϕ , ψ , etc.) with English alphabet letters (*V*, *W*, etc.) to signify variables standing in for verbs.

⁵ Thus reflective endorsement may in particular cases be tacit, unselfconscious, retroactive, or extempore. Cf. A. W. Moore's qualifications on "adopting resolutions" in his 2006, 130, and relatedly Brewer 2002.

tive endorsement on the agent's part must be given *because the reasoning is sound*, since a piece of reasoning that is unsound can no more give rise to reasons than an explanation with false premisses can explain anything. Hence, in accordance with Williams's initial remarks on the view, a statement to the effect that *A* has a reason to *V* can be shown to be false, even if *A* reflectively endorses it, if the reasoning allegedly supporting it is shown to be unsound. And the reasoning may be unsound for *A*'s lacking the relevant element in his *S*, or for having some other false premiss, or again for relying on some illegitimate rule of inference. Consequently, on this internalist view, *A* may falsely believe he has a reason to *V* where in fact he doesn't, and he may fail to believe he has some reasons he in fact does have. Further, although this is not a direct consequence of the view as just formulated, it will be very important that, as Williams rightly emphasises, the process of critical reflection can not just make the agent recognise the reasons he already has, but also generate and articulate new reasons for him, because critical reflection can influence the agent's *S* (Williams 1980/1981, 102-5).

This immediately raises the question what the *soundness* of practical reasoning consists in. In my view, both the starting point and the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning are typically given infinitivally or in the subjunctive mood, so that they are not the kind of items that are straightforwardly true or false; if anything, they are something *to be made* true. In what sense, then, could a piece of practical reasoning be sound or unsound? I must put this important question on hold; it cannot be adequately addressed at least until after the sketch of practical identity and its relation to reasons is given.

Instead, I want to proceed by focusing on another question, also immediately raised by the formulation above, concerning the content of an agent's subjective motivational set *S*. It is vacuous to say that *S* comprises all one's motivationally efficacious states. It is equally unhelpful to say that it comprises all one's "desires" or "pro-attitudes" in some philosophers' technical and wide sense, for in that sense these terms just refer to motivationally efficacious states.⁶ Put in my own preferred terminology, an agent's *S* comprises all his conative states (with their contents) whose contents are adopted as his ends. This calls for an explication of the concepts of conative states and end-adoption.

2. First, conative states are, horizontally, so to speak, to be contrasted with cognitive states. This is a major (though not necessarily exhaustive) division within the class of psychological states ascribable to animate substances with a mind (roughly, an array of

⁶ See Parfit 2011 vol. 1, 43; Davidson 1963/2001, 3-4.

mental capacities).⁷ Both cognitive and conative states have contents that are identified and individuated conceptually. The criteria for determining the presence or absence in a subject of some particular cognitive or conative state with some particular content are in language and action. Thus, most paradigmatically, or at any rate most crudely, to believe that *p* is (among many other things) to be disposed to assert that *p* when the question whether *p* arises, and to want *x* is (among many other things) to be disposed to try to obtain, promote or sustain *x*, when obtainment, promotion or sustainment of *x* is at stake. The content of a cognitive state is typically given propositionally, in the indicative mood. The content of a conative state is typically given infinitivally, or, when it is given propositionally as the content of a *that*-claus, in the subjunctive mood. The conceptual contrast between the two is rather delicate to articulate, but we can roughly say the following.⁸ As I just suggested, the contents of both cognitive and conative states find their expression in language and action. These states in some sense fall short of success when there is a discrepancy between their content expressed in language or action on the one hand and how things in fact are on the other. But whereas in the case of a cognitive state whose content turns out to be false, one rectifies the situation by changing the content of the state in question (or by abandoning the state), that is, by correcting the judgement, a comparable move is no rectification in the case of a conative state whose content turns out to be unrealised; in this case what needs to be corrected is not the judgement but the performance, so as to bring how things are in accordance with the content of the conative state, rather than *vice versa*. Another way to cash out the contrast is this. Cognitive states are answerable to how things are anyway, independently of the subject's having them. By contrast, conative states are not answerable in this sense to how things are anyway; if they are answerable to anything, they are answerable to some of the contents of some one's other conative states, the ones one embraces as one's ends.⁹ To illustrate: I intend to call *A*, and, believing a certain number

⁷ On the nature of the mind, see Hacker 2007 esp. ch. 8. If the mind is understood as (roughly) an array of *intellectual and volitional* capacities (as Hacker does), then the cognitive/conative division will be coordinate to the intellectual/volitional division, and so be exhaustive with respect to the domain of the mental. If the mind is understood to include the receptive capacity, that is, sensitivity, then the division is not exhaustive.

⁸ The following is an unpacking of the insight Anscombe points to by reference to Theophrastus and by her famous example of a man with a shopping list followed by a detective (1963, 4–5, 56). This insight is often distorted by those who brandishes the vague notion of “directions of fit” (e.g. Platts 1979, 256–7). For discussion, see Teichmann 2008, 22–3.

⁹ The Thomistic way of putting this is to say that (some) conative states are known practically, as causes of what is known; the Kantian way of putting this is to say that (some) conative states belong to the faculty of

to be *A*'s, I dial it. So I believe that I am calling *A*. I am mistaken, since the number I am dialling is not *A*'s but *B*'s. When *B* answers, both my intention to call *A* and my belief that I am calling *A* are frustrated. Now, whereas I can remedy my cognitive frustration by acknowledging my belief to be mistaken, I cannot remedy my conative frustration by somehow deciding that I no longer intend to call *A*, or worse, that I never did.¹⁰

Although cognitive and conative states make a contrast, this does not mean that the two kinds do not interact, or that there aren't any hybrid or mixed psychological states. A conative state may very well, even often, depend on a cognitive state (as in what Nagel calls a "motivated desire"¹¹) and *vice versa* (as in wishful thinking or some cases of self-conviction or autosuggestion). Further, emotions are excellent examples of psychological states that have both cognitive and conative aspects.¹²

Next, conative states may be understood broadly or narrowly, now so to speak along the vertical dimension. Broadly understood, they include such sensually appetitive (what Barbara Herman would call "orectic"¹³) states as feelings, sensations and drives,¹⁴ when they are capable of efficiently causing the subject that has them to comport (act or react) in this or that way. Narrowly understood, they exclude these states unless what they produce desire, or "a being's faculty to be by means of its representations the cause of the reality of the objects of these representations" (1788/1996, 5: 9n, emphasis removed; see also 1797/1996, 6: 211; references to Kant's works are to the customary Akademie edition volume and page number).

¹⁰ But note that in fact this *is* sometimes possible, for example if my reason for calling *A* is not at all urgent, and *B* is an enjoyable person to talk with anyway. The main point still stands, that one's intention to call *A* is not satisfied, when one in fact calls *B*, by being abandoned. The possibility of the spontaneous change of heart in response to how things proceed (as in the example just given) shows, however, the weight retroactive reflection can have in what one intends to do: in some cases what one intended to do may be fixed, in some relevant sense of being fixed, after one has performed the action. See Harman 1976, 176–7.

¹¹ Nagel 1970, 29ff.

¹² See Kenny 1989 ch. 4. Aristotle understands emotions similarly. See e.g. *Rhetoric* 1378a20ff, and Nussbaum 2001, 383ff. But this does not mean that emotions are beliefs combined with desires, since the cognitive aspect of emotions may very well fall short of belief. For discussion, see Charles 2004.

¹³ See Herman 2007, ch.1.

¹⁴ But isn't the content of at least some of these states non-conceptual in a way incompatible with my characterisation of conative states as mental states whose contents are identified and individuated conceptually? I suppose there might a sense in which certain feelings or sensations, e.g. feeling of warmth, sensation of pain, or the touch of velvet, may be understood as physiological states with non-conceptualised (purely qualitative?) content (though they need not have such essential phenomenology). But construed as such they cannot be comportment-directing, since they cannot figure in reasoning making sense of an action or reaction. To figure in reasoning they must be conceptualised, by receiving linguistic articulation. On this, see Anscombe 1965/1981.

or prompt the subject that has them to do is adopted as his end. This is purely a matter of terminological policy. I will take the (vertically) broad understanding of conative states, making a further distinction within the class of conative states, namely between ones whose contents are adopted as the agent's ends and ones that are not. The class consisting in one's conative states whose contents are adopted as one's ends then comprises the class of one's *S*.¹⁵ Such conative states I shall sometimes describe as *practically productive*. One reason to opt for the broad understanding is that, on the narrow understanding, one would have to say non-linguistic animals are incapable of having conative states, since, as we shall see, end-adoption requires the capacity of reason that is also the capacity for language.¹⁶ But it would be rather cumbersome to hold that when a child wants (desires) to go out and run around while a cat wants (desires) to be curled up in front of the fire, "want" or "desire" is equivocal. It is more natural to say that they both have the conative state of wanting (or desiring), and make further subdivisions.¹⁷

3. What, then, is it for a content of a conative state to be adopted as one's end? The simple answer is: it is for that content to be the starting point of a piece of practical reasoning which one can reflectively endorse as making sense why something ought to be the case. But this is hardly anything more than Williams's original formulation rephrased in my own jargon. In order to derive some elucidation from it, I want to pick up on two cues. The first is Kenny's discussion of the will (1989 ch.3 esp. 36–42), and the second is Frankfurt's discussion of it (in particular in his 1971/1998 and 1982/1998).

Kenny distinguishes the kinds of wants which humans and non-human animals can both have, which he calls "desire," and the kinds of wants which only language-using animals like humans can have, which he calls "volition." Thus, while the content (object) of desire

¹⁵ If one takes the narrow view, then one's *S* coincides with the class of one's conative states. But then one would want a name for the class of seemingly conative states that are ruled out – cumbersome, "sub-conative states," perhaps. Presumably the Greek philosophers called such desire-like states as those that humans and non-human animals both have "*epithumia*," which the scholastics translated into Latin as "*concupiscentia*" (Kenny 1989, 35–6). Kant seems to use "concupiscence" in this sense; see 1797/1996, 6: 213 and 1786/2007, 8: 111.

¹⁶ Wouldn't non-linguistic animals be ruled out even on the broad understanding of conative states that I favour, since by my own right their contents are conceptually identified and individuated? No, because non-linguistic animals can command some relatively primitive concepts, namely ones whose mastery can be manifested by non-linguistic behaviour (see Kenny 1989, 37).

¹⁷ Thus when Williams writes that "desiring to do something is of course a reason for doing it" (1985/2006, 19), this is too quick. There are different kinds of desirings that need to be distinguished.

and the content (object) of volition are both conceptually identified and individuated, the latter is more specifically *linguistically* identified and individuated.¹⁸ Crucially, only the latter can figure in practical reasoning, considered either as a structure or as an activity, since reasoning in general is a species of explanation whose explanans and explanandum are items that are linguistically identified and individuated. Performing an intentional action for a reason is a matter of performing an action on the basis of practical reasoning. More specifically, the intention with which such an action is performed is the end that is the starting point of the relevant piece of practical reasoning, and the reason for which such an action is performed is the grounding considerations, or the premisses bridging the end and the conclusion (a content that may be realised in action, decision, or intention, etc.). This means, for one thing, that only language-using beings can perform intentional actions for a reason, because only such beings can make sense of things by reasoning or engage in the process of reasoning.¹⁹

It should not surprise us that if, as Williams suggests, what reasons there are depends in part on a certain set of our conative states, this set has something to do with our capacity of reason, or more specifically, our linguistic capacity to engage in various activities of reasoning. To appreciate this connection further, at this juncture we may compare needs and wants.²⁰ For: don't needs give rise to reasons, although they have nothing specifically to do with the capacity of reason?²¹ Properly understood, this is true, but "give rise to" is the operative phrase here. The object of a need – that for which something is needed – can indeed

¹⁸ See the penultimate footnote of the previous section.

¹⁹ Kant offers a similar account of progressively reason-dependent and therefore sophisticated kinds of conative states in his 1786/2007. It may be thought that at least some non-human animals are capable of intentional action. I could accommodate such a view: such animals do indeed sometimes act intentionally, insofar as they have aims (ends) that they realise in acting, but even in such cases they do not act for a reason, since they either lack the relevant grounding considerations, or cannot put the end and the action together by means of them.

²⁰ For a delightfully lucid exposition of the conceptual similarities and differences between needs and wants, see White 1975 ch.8.

²¹ Williams thus asks whether *S* contains needs (1980/1981, 105). He decides that it need not, for what I take to be essentially the same reasons as I am about to explain. Moore echoes the question, and tentatively the answer as well (1999, 273 n4). There is a boring sense in which states of needs are clearly not conative states. For, as I said, whereas conative states are states ascribable to animate substances with a mind, needs can be ascribed to a much wider classes of things. Thus not only do I need to sleep well to work well; rice need appropriate amount of rain to grow; the broken door needs to be fixed; the meeting needs to be postponed; this presentation needs to be short; and so on. But the crucial question is surely whether, when an agent endowed with reason needs something, it also conates it so that it has a reason to pursue what it needs.

be an end adopted, that is, it can *become* the content of a conative state belonging to *S*. When this happens, this need may be rightly said to give rise to reasons. But not all such claims of need are adopted as ends, and more significantly, there is none that must be. An animate agent, considered as a member of a biological, or more broadly ethnological species, needs *x*, or to *V*, always for realising, promoting, sustaining, or protecting some end identifiable in reference to some aspect of life characteristic of that species: e.g. survival, health, esteem, pleasure, wisdom, happiness, job, privacy, savings, various kinds of entitlement, and so on – ends we might think of as constituting the *well-being* of the agent. But none of these ends needs to be adopted, that is, none needs to be the content of one's conative states in which one's *S* consists. In other words, the aspirations of an agent, considered as an individual with a life to lead, endowed with the capacity for practical reasoning, may fail to converge with, have no grounds in, or even run counter to, the ends he has as a biological, ethnological species-being.²² One may be indifferent to, or even renounce any of the “ends” of one's needs, including life itself. Asceticism as a way of life can be extreme, and there is such a thing as suicide that is at once the ultimate denial of life *and* an ultimate expression of one's will. Thus all objects of need are only *potentially* reason-giving; they give rise to reasons only when they are also objects of certain conative states, i.e. only when they are pursued as ends.²³

One upshot of the conceptual cleavage between needs and wants is this. If we choose to speak of well-being in this connection, we should distinguish at least two kinds: *species-being-need-based* well-being, we might call the one, and the other, *reason-based* well-being. *Ethics*, in the sense in which Williams contrasts it with morality (most prominently

²² See Kant 1786/2007, 8: 111–2. This is perhaps one of Kant's most “existentially” charged moments: “it is a property of reason that with the assistance of the power of imagination it can concoct desires not only *without* a natural drive directed to them but even *contrary to it* . . . [The human being] discovered in himself a faculty of choosing for himself a way of living and not being bound to a single one, as other animals are . . . anxiety and fright must have followed right away . . . He stood, as it were, on the brink of an abyss; for instead of the single objects of his desire to which instinct had up to now directed him, there opened up an infinity of them, and he did not know how to relate to the choice between them; and from this estate of freedom, once he has tasted it, it was nevertheless wholly impossible for him to turn back again to that of servitude.”

²³ Kant's way of putting this point is this: “freedom of the power of choice [*Willkür*] has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself)” (1793/1996, 6: 24). Henry Allison has dubbed this the “incorporation thesis.” See e.g. his 2011, 114–20.

in his 1985/2006), I am inclined to say, chiefly has to do with the latter. But note: this is not to say that morality has chiefly to do with the former. Indeed a large set of difficult issues arises from the fact that it has anyhow to do with *both*. In particular, questions concerning political arrangements, rights, justice and education must in some ways strive to strike the right balance, and achieve some kind of reconciliation, between the two.

Be any of this as it may, getting back to end-adoption, as a first pass, one might say the following: to adopt an end is to have a volition, which in Kenny's words is to have "a mental state of being favourably disposed to actions, or state of affairs, answering to a particular linguistic description" (1989, 41). But unless the mental state in question is question-beggingly assumed to be had *for the sake of an end adopted*, this characterisation is insufficient. For when I am conscious of myself as being sleepy, for instance, I have a conscious mental state of being favourably disposed to my sleeping (or the state of affairs in which I am asleep), answering to the linguistic description: *that I sleep* (or *that I be asleep*). But this content may not be an object of my volitions, or the end I have (even if I am sensually gratified if I do fall asleep, this would not be an achievement of my will – on the contrary, it may well be its defeat). Something more is needed than the mere possession of the right kind of mental state, in order for its content to be an end adopted.

4. This something is, I suggest, what Frankfurt variously describes as second-order volition, identification, caring, or taking of a reflexively active stance.²⁴ A second-order volition, as he defines it, is a specific kind of second-order desire (desire about desire), namely a desire that a particular first-order desire be that because of which one comports in a particular way.²⁵ When one has a desire of this kind, we may now say, the content of the first-order desire (figuring as the content of the second-order desire) is an end adopted.

²⁴ On the relation among these different characterisations, see Moran 2002. Moran argues that "the problems of identification and alienation are inextricably related to those responses of the person for which reason is an issue" (215). Roughly and metaphorically, Moran suggests that what one cares or identifies with is an element (action, reaction, feeling, state of affairs, etc.) in the space of one's reasons, an element that can be issued in the conclusion of one's practical reasoning. As Frankfurt points out in his reply to Moran, this gets things the other way around. It is in virtue of identification and care that one has the particular space of reasons one has (Frankfurt 2002, 219). Be this as it may, Moran's discussion contains a number of important points concerning the connection between identification and reasons that I have found useful.

²⁵ Frankfurt's own phraseology is to say it is a desire that a particular first-order desire be "motivationally effective" or equivalently that it be part of one's will. (1971/1998 sec. 1). The will as Frankfurt conceives it and S as Williams conceives it, then, in essence coincide.

Three points should be noted. First, the content of an end so adopted need not concern some action that is within the agent's voluntary power to perform. It may concern a reaction or some affective response, or even some state of affairs upon whose obtainment the agent may have little or virtually no influence. Thus someone may hope to keep calm in the face of some extremely upsetting scene he expects to confront, want his daughter to be successful in school, or desire that Arsenal be always at the top of the Premier League. Not only that, this person may reflectively endorse these conative states, in having the relevant second-order volitions, that is, in willing that the contents of these first-order conative states normatively direct his comportment.²⁶ By virtue of such second-order volitions, the contents of the first-order desires can be starting-points of practical reasoning by which this person can articulate why something ought to be the case, centrally including what he has reason to do. In other words, the contents of these first-order desires are ends adopted by him.

Second, end-adoption is not typically something that can be brought about directly by a sheer "act of will" (whatever this might be).²⁷ Often, perhaps for the most part, ends are adopted subconsciously, or at any rate not as a result of deliberation or conscious reflection, but as a result of hardened custom, habits, social role-playing, or even by sheer chance, or perhaps retroactively, almost like an afterthought.²⁸ Thus an activity one began to engage as a mere pastime may become the object of one's deepest passion. One may become a committed political activist, a devoted teacher, or a loving mother, without ever consciously deciding to be one. Or, to mention Frankfurt's signature case, one may fall in love (or *realise* – in the sense almost indistinguishable from *decide* – that one *has been* in love all along). Such "becomings" as these, so to speak, all involve adoption of various ends that grounds various reasons, though the adoption may be tacit, unselfconscious, retroactive, or extempore.²⁹ This does not mean that the ends thus adopted are themselves not susceptible to rational appraisal. Indeed one of the most important functions of critical reflection is to examine, justify, vindicate, modify, discard, or otherwise make (better) sense of such ends.

²⁶ See Frankfurt 1982/1998 sec. 3.

²⁷ See e.g. Frankfurt 1993/1999, 112; 1994/1999, 136.

²⁸ This is why, throughout the discussion, whenever grammar permits, I largely opt for the passive voice, speaking of the contents adopted as one's ends rather than the contents one adopts as ends, since the latter can connote *activity* on one's part, in the sense in which it is often absent in end-adoption.

²⁹ As Philip Larkin writes, many of the ends that we end up adopting and whose importance we largely take for granted come "not from what / We think truest, or most want to do / ... They're more a style / Our lives bring with them: habit for a while, / Suddenly they harden into all we've got // And how we got it" ("Dockery and Son" vv. 36–41; Larkin 2012, 66). See also the epigraph to this essay.

Third, if, as I shall explore further in what follows, the ends one adopts in some sense comprise the matter of one's practical identity (or what Frankfurt calls one's will), some parts of its material contour can also be indicated by considering the ends that one does *not* adopt, or more significantly the ends that one either refuses to adopt or finds oneself incapable of adopting. One's practical identity can thus be articulated, as it were, either from inside or outside, by reference to what is included or what is excluded. This is a point Williams passingly makes in his discussion of deliberative priority: "An effective way for actions to be ruled out is that they never come into thought at all. . . . some concerns are best embodied in this way, in deliberative silence" (1985/2006, 185). This will be important to keep in mind when we consider, in the next section, ethical incapacity in relation to practical identity.

Now, we do not have second-order volitions concerning all our first-order conative states. Suppose I prefer peach to melon, so that when I have a choice between the two, all other things being equal I tend to have the former. But I neither endorse nor repudiate this first-order preference. I am volitionally indifferent to it. *For me to choose peach over melon when I have a choice* is not in the relevant sense among my ends. The first-order preference in question is not in my *S*, then. It follows that this preference does not give me a reason. Some might find this counterintuitive. But if this is a bullet, it can be safely bitten. The issue is relatively minor. Consider the spontaneous whimsical urge to see if one can reach a spot on the wall-paper by standing on one's toe.³⁰ Does it give one a reason to try? That one just has this urge to do it is, some would hold, a reason (at least when other things are equal); others would hold it is no reason at all. The truth is, for our purposes, nothing significant hangs on the answer either way. If the content of a conative state to which one is volitionally indifferent is admitted as reason-giving, and therefore, by Williams's right, part of one's *S*, then the contents of *S* no longer coincides with the matter of one's practical identity.³¹ (Or if the coincidence between *S* and the matter of practical identity is maintained, one could say that the volitionally indifferent conative states are relatively insignificant part of one's practical identity.) My suggestion still stands, namely that at least ethically the most significant part of the matter of one's practical identity consists in practically produc-

³⁰ This is Anscombe's example. See 1963, 91. For discussion of such apparently "reason-less, merely voluntary" actions, see Teichmann 2008 ch.1 sec. 3.2.

³¹ It should be noted in any case that something's belonging to *S* and its having some appropriate deliberative route to *V*-ing is not a *sufficient* condition for its giving rise to a reason to *V*. Its potential to give rise to reasons may be denied on some other ground.

tive conative states, i.e. those whose contents are adopted as one's ends, in the sense that I have been unpacking.

5. The ends adopted by an agent are the starting points of practical reasoning (what Williams calls "deliberative route") that articulates the reasons that there are for the agent. The reasons such practical reasoning articulates are of different degrees of exigency. When the action that a piece of practical reasoning articulates the agent as having a reason to perform (if he can) is only one among many sufficient means, for instance, and the agent knows he can just as easily perform some other action that is also a sufficient means for the same end, the reason he has to perform the first action is not markedly strong, since it is only as strong as the reason he has to perform the other action. Indeed, absent some further considerations he has no reason to perform the one *rather than the other*. In such cases we may hesitate to put the conclusion of practical reasoning in terms of "ought," since without the technical qualification "*pro tanto*" this auxiliary often connotes something like "ought overall." On the other hand, if a piece of practical reasoning singles out some action as a *necessary* means for an end adopted, then often the reason the agent has to perform this action is expressed in terms of "should" or even "must."

But we should notice that the necessity registered by the "must" here is conditional upon the relevant end being adopted by the agent. As Williams points out, "I must go now" can be completed with "– if I am to get to the movies" (1985/2006, 188). One can discharge the normative requirement imposed here by the reason to go now *either* by actually taking one's leave *or* by disowning the end of getting to the movies. Thus, in many instances where "must" is used to express the conclusion of practical reasoning, it is taken for granted that the end is accepted (Williams 1981, 126). There are, however, more "serious" cases, where a "must" is "unconditional and *goes all the way down*" (Williams 1985/2006, 188 his emphasis), where it denotes not the conditional necessity of a means given an end, but the necessity of the end being adopted by the agent, or, as I prefer to say, the necessity of the practical engagement between the end and the agent. Williams calls such cases cases of "practical necessity" (1981 ch. 10).

Having identified the serious, "practical necessity" sense of "must," Williams points out that the notion of necessity such as this "must" carries is conceptually tied up with a corresponding notion of impossibility.³² Thus, roughly, in the sense in question, *I must V*

³² Very much relevant here also is a notion David Wiggins sometimes deploys, of *there being nothing else to think, or want, or do* (see e.g. Wiggins 1998, Essay 4 and Postscript to Essays 1–9, sec. 4). I cannot discuss the

means *I cannot not V*, and *I must not V* means *I cannot V*. Practical necessity and practical incapacity³³ are therefore two sides of the same coin. Williams's strategy is to analyse the sense of impossibility operative here.³⁴ My suggestion is that the sense of practical incapacity Williams's discussion illuminates has to do with *practical identity*, by which I mean roughly the set of loves, cares, concerns, grounding projects, and other contents of conative states deeply embraced as ends, which transforms an agent into a person.

When a certain course of comportment presents itself to an agent as something he cannot, in the practical incapacity sense, do, what is claimed to be impossible is, I suggest, roughly the following: that this agent should let the course of comportment run and thereby let some of his ends be either destroyed or irrevocably damaged. What this agent cannot lose are those ends. But in what sense can he not lose them? It would be handy to have a concrete example to consider. Endo Shusaku's novel *Silence* narrates the story of Sebastião Rodrigues, a Portuguese Jesuit sent to Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate period, when Christianity was outlawed. Rodrigues is betrayed, arrested, and persecuted. The officers try to make him trample on a *fumi-e*, or a carved image of Christ. To do so would be for Rodrigues to commit apostasy, and this, we may plausibly say, he cannot, in the relevant practical incapacity sense, do. It is clear that no empirical (physical or psychological) incapacity is here in question.³⁵ Not only can he trample on the picture in ignorance or by

connections here. For a dense discussion, see Moore 2000.

³³ Note that Williams 1992–3/1995 is entitled “Moral incapacity.” But as Williams makes clear in the first footnote to this paper, he does not here intend to use “moral” in special contradistinction to the non-moral, or what lies outside of the supposedly self-contained domain of the morality system. What he means by “moral” in the context of this paper is better captured by “ethical,” or even more broadly, “practical.”

³⁴ In what follows I shall concentrate on Williams 1981 ch. 10 and 1992–3/1995. Williams's discussion in these pieces and elsewhere has a number of rich layers of themes from which I must abstract in the present context. One is his discussion of the differences between first-personal and third-personal uses of the practical modals. Another is the different implications these modals have when used in the past tense, in particular in their connection with the practice of blame and regret, and further, with luck and freedom. Yet another is the examination of the force of these modals when they purport to express overriding, impersonal, and in some sense “pure” obligations issuing from some system of morality. On these issues, see, *inter alia*: Williams 1981 chs. 1, 9, 10; 2006 ch. 10; 1989/1995; 1992–3/1995. Further, see Williams 2002 ch. 6 sec. 3, where the notion of necessity is discussed in the context of the relation between realism and the idea of resistance (of an order of things independent of us) as having to do with the (in)conceivability of alternatives.

³⁵ Of course, it is in some very broad sense a psychological question, insofar as questions about the will and practical identity are psychological questions (we are not concerned with souls, spirits or Cartesian egos construed as super-naturalistic entities). My emphasis is on “empirical”: Rodrigues's incapacity under consideration is not one of empirical psychological incapacity, like the incapacity of visually imagining the difference

accident (unintentionally or even involuntarily); if he tried to do it, he might well succeed. Indeed, at the climax of the narrative, Rodrigues does give in and trample on the picture. Now, although as Williams points out, practical incapacity for *V-ing* may often show itself in the agent's not even thinking of *V-ing* in his practical thought,³⁶ this is not the case in this example. Further, although it is fair to suppose that Rodrigues must have encountered a variety of sheer psychological difficulties in thinking of *V-ing* as an option,³⁷ such difficulties are not what accounts for his practical incapacity, since, as we can reasonably suppose, he overcame these difficulties, thoroughly reflected on the implications of trampling on the *fumi-e*, and concluded that he cannot do it.³⁸ Instead, one natural interpretation of the case would be this: Rodrigues cannot trample on the image of Christ, in the sense that, were he to do it, he would either no longer be the person he is, or at least he would lose a very important part of the person he is. And this would be because the end that is threatened by the action of trampling, the end, we might say, of living a life in Christ, belongs to the core of Rodrigues's personality, or his practical identity.

6. And Williams suggests as much, although his preferred term for what I am proposing to call practical identity is "character." Thus he writes:

what one can do sets the limits to deliberation, and . . . character is revealed by what one chooses within those limits, among the things that one can do. But character . . . is equally revealed in the location of those limits, and in the very fact that one can determine . . . that one cannot do certain things . . . Incapacities can not only set limits to character and provide conditions of it, but can also partly constitute its substance (1981, 130).

For Williams, then, the phenomenon of practical necessity is a site wherein the constitutive connection between one's ends and one's practical identity can be vividly observed. This view resonates extremely well with Frankfurt's. He points out that one might so strongly

between a thousand-sided figure and a thousand-and-one-sided figure, or of aurally imagining a certain choral piece in retrograde.

³⁶ "Thinking that something is unthinkable is not so direct a witness to its being unthinkable as is being incapable of thinking of it" (Williams 1981, 129).

³⁷ Such psychological difficulties are part of what some psychologists (e.g. Jonathan Haidt) are interested in in their investigation into people's intuitive reactions to "moral dumbfounding" scenarios.

³⁸ I am, inevitably, grossly simplifying the case by abstracting it from numerous complications actually narrated and explored in the novel. For instance, just before Rodrigues decides to trample on the *fumi-e*, he hears the image of Christ speak to him: "Trample! Trample! It is to be trampled on by you that I am here."

identify with some ends by way of some second-order volition of caring that the entirety of his comportments are directed by these ends, that he may realise “what he cares about matters to him not merely so much, but in such a way, that it is impossible for him to forbear from a certain course of action” (1982/1998, 86; see also 1993/1999, 110–1). Instead of calling this phenomenon practical necessity, which he might well have, he calls it “volitional necessity,” since it pertains neither to cause nor to logic, but to the will,³⁹ which he effectively defines in an earlier paper as the set of ends adopted by an agent, which set is essential to this agent’s being a person (1982/1998, 86 and 1971/1998, 14–6).

Frankfurt then goes on famously to claim that the experience of volitional necessity – reflective encounter with the limits of one’s will – may be thought of less as one of bumping into inhibitive, constraining walls than as one of liberating moment in which what one most fundamentally is is most fully expressed. Thus the conception of practical identity I broached in the previous section, where practical identity consists in those ends one cannot, of practical necessity, abandon, echoes Frankfurt’s. On his view, the essence of a thing is given by what it must of necessity be. The essence of a triangle, for instance, is what it must logically and conceptually (as a matter of geometrical necessity) be: a plane closed figure with three straight sides. Analogously, he writes, “the essential nature of a person is constituted by his necessary personal characteristics. . . . especially characteristics of his will [which are its] reflexive, or higher-order, volitional features” (1993/1999, 113). Elsewhere he expounds:

The essence of a person . . . is a matter of the contingent volitional necessities by which the will of the person is as a matter of fact constrained. . . . Our essential natures as individuals are constituted, accordingly, by what we cannot help caring about. The necessities of love, and their relative order or intensity, define our volitional boundaries. They mark our volitional limits, and thus they delineate our shapes as persons. (1994/1999, 138)

To put the main idea in my own phraseology, one’s practical identity consists in those ends that one finds in reflection to be ones with which one cannot help but be practically engaged, those ends that are, in virtue of such fundamental practical engagements, the ulti-

³⁹ A popular exemplary expression of volitional necessity is one that is attributed (apocryphally, scholars now believe) to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” This example, as well as Frankfurt’s account of volitional necessity as a whole, continues to be engulfed in the vast metaphysical sea of the free will and alternative possibilities literature, drowning in waves of confusion and fruitless conundrums.

mate sources of the comportment-direction that imbues the life that one leads as a person with a normative order. Inescapable aspirations, so to speak, are the stuff of who each of us is as a person. But one must not mistake *inescapable* ends for *inherent* ends. In the passage just quoted, “contingent” and “as a matter of fact” are the operative phrases. Although Frankfurt speaks of the “essence” of a person, he does not think there can be such things as essential ends that are universally adopted by all persons. Practical identity is no more an *entity* with some immutable defining core than Williams’s *S* is something statically given.⁴⁰ Rather (to put it a tad poetically) it is something *lived*, something that dynamically emerges and evolves as we engage in reflective and volitional activities. Both Frankfurt and Williams have expended an enormous amount of philosophical effort in arguing that, in the realistic and human picture of life, even the claim of pure and impersonal ends such as those issued in the form of moral obligations (those ends that one might have hoped to be absolutely inherent) makes up just one among many competing voices, out of which each of us is free to thread our own individual melodies,⁴¹ although this freedom itself is, as the two philosophers have also painstakingly emphasised, conditioned by a variety of historical and cultural contingencies.

7. I took as my starting point Williams’s formulation of internalism about reasons, and gave an initial outline of a conception of practical identity, according to which, to put it extremely roughly, what we reflectively strive for determines who we are, and who we are determines what reasons we have.⁴² This must come as a deep disappointment to the

⁴⁰ See Williams 1980/1981, 105. Velleman (2002/2006) misinterprets what Frankfurt means when the latter speaks of the *essence* of a person. Velleman’s own conception of the self as “a reflexive guise under which parts or aspects of a person are presented to his own mind” (2006, 1) is in fact highly congenial to Frankfurt’s view, and hence mine, of practical identity. See Frankfurt 2002 (124) where he corrects Velleman.

⁴¹ Thus Frankfurt: “The ideals that define the essential nature of a person need not be moral ideals . . . The most decisive boundaries of a person’s life may derive from imperatives of tradition, of style, of intellect, or of some other mode of ambition” (1993/1999, 115). The imperative of love is Frankfurt’s signature theme. The struggle between the multifarious and personal voice of the ethical and the systematic and impersonal voice of the moral, and the philosophy’s (or reason’s) role in the adjudication between the two, is one of the grand themes of Williams 1985/2006.

⁴² Some may suspect a circularity in my discussion: I claim practical identity to be constituted at its core by conative states adopted as non-negotiable ends, and at the same time speak of practical identity as explaining why the contents of certain conative states are non-negotiable ends. But if there is a circularity, it is benign; for the purpose of my discussion is not to *analyse* away one in terms of the other, but to *elucidate* the connection between the two (on this, see Wiggins 1998, 188–9). Practical necessities (and incapacities) indicate practical identity; at the same time, practical identity, insofar as it is recognised as such, can be appealed to to make

externalist, who demands reasons that are objective in the sense of commanding normative force over every agent irrespective of each individual's contingent conative profile.

So much the worth for objectivity, one might say. But that would be too quick. What the view as so far sketched suggests is only that the constitution of the *matter* of practical identity is historically and culturally contingent. Nothing of substance has yet been said about the *formal* implications of the constitution of practical identity. To just give a fore-taste of what must follow this preparatory essay: it may be that any agent with practical identity – a person – is, by virtue of having a practical engagement with a concrete end, thereby also committed to the *form* of such practical-identity-constitutive engagement. And this may have implications concerning what reasons there can be. For instance, Frankfurt suggests that anyone who is a person, that is anyone who cares about something, is committed to something like an ideal of self-respect.⁴³ Might not this suggestion be expanded, so that anyone who is a person, thanks to his individual practical engagement, is thereby also practically engaged with the formal end of, let us say, every human being's being a person? If something like this line of thought can be made good, it would have a hope of imposing some objective *limits* to reasons, denouncing those comportments that undermine or degrade personhood as such. There may not be any reasons that can be recommended impersonally and universally; there may however be absolute prohibitions. What is more, articulation of such purely formal prohibitions is arguably the gist of Kant's so-called humanity formula of the categorical imperative. Be any of this as it may, much more work remains to be done before we can understand aright the possibility of objectivity within the boundaries of internalism.

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⁴³ Frankfurt 1994/1999, 139–41.

discussion.

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